



Relationship between loneliness and symptoms of anxiety and depression in African American men and women: Evidence for gender as a moderator[☆]



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ABSTRACT

We examined for gender differences in loneliness and negative affective conditions, namely, symptoms of anxiety and depression, in 168 African American college students. Gender differences were examined as a predictor of negative affective conditions and as a moderator of the relationship between loneliness and negative affective conditions. Although no significant differences were found in levels of loneliness and negative affective conditions between African American men and women, results of regression analyses indicated that gender differences significantly predicted anxious and depressive symptoms. Moreover, a significant Gender \times Loneliness interaction effect was found in predicting both anxious and depressive symptoms. Specifically, higher levels of anxious and depressive symptoms were found among lonely African American women, compared to men. These findings suggest that the negative psychological effects of loneliness may be particularly more damaging for African American women than men. Understanding the unique challenges of African American women, compared to men, as a double minority is discussed.

1. Introduction

According to the U.S. Census (2015), ethnoracial groups will make up > 55% of the American population by 2060. Among ethnoracial groups, African Americans currently make up the second largest group, only behind Hispanics (Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation, 2014), and their growth as a single or mixed ethnoracial group is expected to grow from 45.7 million in 2014 to 74.5 million by 2060 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015). This suggests that in considering mental health issues in American society, it will be important for researchers to understand the mental health concerns of a growing number of ethnoracial groups, including African Americans. Indeed, findings from studies have shown that negative affective conditions (e.g., anxious symptoms, depressive symptoms) represent an important mental health concern among African American adults (e.g., Bailey, Blackmon, & Stevens, 2009; Hunter & Schmidt, 2010). For example, although the 12-month prevalence rate for major depressive disorder has been estimated to be 6.7% in the general population (Kessler, Chiu, Demler, & Walters, 2005), it has been found to be 10.4% among African American adults (Williams et al., 2007). Despite these considerations, few studies have specifically looked at predictors of negative affective conditions (e.g., anxious & depressive symptoms) in African American adults.

1.1. Loneliness as a predictor of anxious and depressive symptoms in African Americans

According to Russell, Peplau, and Cutrona (1980), *loneliness*, as measured by their widely used revised UCLA Loneliness Scale or R-UCLA, is defined by feelings and thoughts of being isolated and disconnected from others. Across more than half a century, findings from thousands of studies to date have pointed to a positive association between loneliness and negative affective conditions (see Cacioppo & Patrick, 2008; Heinrich & Gullone, 2006, for reviews), with some evidence also supporting the role of loneliness as a prospective predictor of increased risk for negative affective conditions across time (e.g., Jaremka et al., 2014). For example, in one of the earliest empirical studies to look at the impact of feeling lonely among adults, Rose (1947) found that college students who experienced high loneliness (i.e., repeatedly became homesick) had higher scores on measures of anxiety and depression, compared to groups of students who were low on loneliness (viz., never homesick & rarely homesick). Findings from more recent studies affirm a similar pattern. For example, in a sample of college students, Muyan et al. (2016) found that loneliness was significantly and positively associated with both anxious and depressive symptoms. Noteworthy, in contrast to the thousands of published studies in the extant literature on loneliness, only a few published studies have examined for the relationship between loneliness and negative

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affective conditions involving African American adults. This represents a critical lacking in the empirical literature given that findings from recent studies have shown that psychological processes (e.g., mastery, hopelessness) presumed to be associated with depressive symptoms vary considerably between African Americans and Caucasian Americans (Assari & Lankarani, 2016, 2017). That said, findings from these few studies have nonetheless supported the notion that loneliness is positively associated with negative affective conditions. For example, in a study of college students, Hirsch, Chang, and Jeglic (2012) found that among a range of key psychosocial predictors of suicide risk (viz., social problem-solving deficits, loneliness, & life stress), loneliness emerged as the only unique predictor of suicidal behaviors for African Americans. Alternatively, in a study involving African American and Caucasian American adults, (Lincoln, Chatters, & Taylor, 2003; see also, Krause, 2006) found that (lack of) social support played a stronger role in predicting emotional distress (e.g., feeling blue) for African Americans, whereas negative interactions with others was found to play a stronger role in predicting emotional distress in Caucasian Americans. Thus, these findings indicate that experience of loneliness may be a particularly important variable to study when examining negative affective conditions in African American populations.

1.2. Is it important to consider gender differences in understanding the relationship between loneliness and negative affective conditions in African Americans?

An examination of the relationship between loneliness and negative affective conditions in African American adults might, however, benefit from taking into account gender differences. Women, compared to men, are believed to be more sensitive to the interpersonal context, desiring greater interpersonal connectedness than interpersonal autonomy (Cross & Madson, 1997). In turn, this greater sensitivity appears to be associated with added risk for experiencing negative affective conditions, such as depression, in women compared to men (Cambron, Acitelli, & Pettit, 2009; Liu & Alloy, 2010).

There are at least two ways in which gender differences might matter. First, consistent with findings from some studies, gender differences might be an important determinant or predictor of loneliness and negative affective conditions in African Americans. For example, in a study involving a large general sample of college students, McWhirter (1997) found that gender was a significant predictor of R-UCLA scores. Noteworthy, in a study involving an ethnoracially diverse sample of college freshmen, Sundberg (1988) found that women scored significantly higher on a measure of loneliness than did men. A closer look at Sundberg's findings indicate that African American women, compared to African American men, scored higher on each of the loneliness items that were administered in the study. Unfortunately, however, these findings were not based on using the R-UCLA and involved responses obtained from a small sample of African American freshmen ($N = 34$). Alternatively, in a sample of 1538 African Americans, Fitzpatrick, Piko, Wright, and LaGory (2005) found that gender differences predicted depressive symptoms. Specifically, African American women, compared to men, reported greater depressive symptoms. However, this sample was limited to middle and high school students. Second, given findings pointing to gender differences in the role of interpersonal factors on depressive symptoms (Cambron et al., 2009; Liu & Alloy, 2010), gender differences might moderate the relationship between loneliness and negative affective conditions in African Americans. Although this hypothesis has not been directly tested, there is some indirect evidence for this possibility. Specifically, in a recent study of HIV + African American older adults, Mannes et al. (2016) found that the association between loneliness, using an earlier version of the R-UCLA, and substance use (viz., illicit drug use & heavy drinking) was present for African American women, but not for African American men. Because substance use is heavily comorbid with negative affective conditions (e.g., anxiety & depression; Lai, Clearly, Sitharthan, & Hunt,

2015), a pattern also found in African Americans (e.g., Gibbons et al., 2007), this raises the possibility that gender might moderate any positive association present between loneliness and negative affective conditions in African American adults. As noted above, however, this hypothesis has yet to be empirically examined. Yet, as some have argued, there are distinct burdens and negative consequences associated with being Black and female (Greene, 1994).

2. Purpose of the present study

Given these limitations and concerns regarding the potential importance of gender differences for understanding the relationship between loneliness and negative affective conditions, namely, anxious and depressive symptoms, in African American adults, the present study was conducted. We had two specific objectives: 1) to examine for gender differences on loneliness and negative affective conditions in African American students; and 2) to determine if gender differences moderate any association present between loneliness and negative affective conditions in African American students.

Consistent with past research findings, we expected African American women, compared to men, to report greater loneliness (Sundberg, 1988) and symptoms of anxiety and depression (Fitzpatrick et al., 2005). Moreover, consistent with the notion that gender differences might moderate the relationship between loneliness and negative affective conditions in African American adults (Mannes et al., 2016), we expected to find evidence for a Gender \times Loneliness interaction effect in predicting anxious and depressive symptoms. Thus, for example, we expected to find higher levels of anxious and depressive symptoms in lonely African American women than men.

3. Method

3.1. Participants

A total of 168 self-identified African American college students attending a large public university in the Midwest participated in the present study. A hundred and seventeen (69.6%) were women, and fifty one (30.4%) were men. All participants were enrolled in an Introduction to Psychology course and earned research credit for participating. Ages ranged from 18 to 35 years, with a mean age of 20.38 ($SD = 3.37$). Most of the participants were seniors (33.9%), followed by freshmen (25.3%), sophomores (20.6%), and juniors (19.4%).

3.2. Measures

3.2.1. Loneliness

Loneliness was assessed by the revised UCLA Loneliness Scale (R-UCLA; Russell et al., 1980). The scale consists of 20 items, half of which describe non-lonely thoughts (e.g., "There are people I feel close to"), while the other half characterizes feelings of loneliness (e.g., "I feel isolated from others"). Respondents are asked to rate the statements on the frequency with which they experience these feelings using a 4-point Likert-type scale, ranging from 1 (*never*) to 4 (*often*). Higher scores on the R-UCLA indicate greater levels of loneliness.

3.2.2. Anxious symptoms

Anxious symptoms were measured using the Beck Anxiety Inventory (BAI; Beck, Epstein, Brown, & Steer, 1988). The BAI is a 21-item self-report measure consisting of common symptoms of anxiety (e.g., "Fear of the worst happening"). Respondents are asked to rate the extent to which they have experienced each symptom over the past week using a 4-point Likert-type scale ranging from 0 (*not at all*) to 3 (*severely*). Higher scores on the BAI indicate greater anxious symptoms.

3.2.3. Depressive symptoms

Depressive symptoms were measured using the Beck Depression

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